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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ISTANBUL 000023

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TAGS: [PGOV PHUM PREL TU](#)  
SUBJECT: ISTANBUL CONTACTS ON ELECTION PROSPECTS

REF: A. 09 ISTANBUL 180  
[1](#)B. 09 ANKARA 1791

Classified By: ACTING PRINCIPAL OFFICER WIN DAYTON FOR REASONS 1.4(B) A  
ND (D)

1.(C) Summary. Echoing the national debate, Istanbul-based opposition party representatives and political pundits continue to predict that elections will be held in 2010 despite Prime Minister Erdogan's insistence that there will not be early elections. Our contacts from various polling firms, the Republican People's Party (CHP), and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) separately have speculated on the possibility of a CHP-MHP coalition government resulting from the coming election. All attribute the decline in support for the Justice and Development Party (AKP) to economic trends and the government's perceived mismanagement of the National Unity Project (formerly Democratic Opening). The opposition's insistence that unforeseen external events will force early elections may be a calculated approach designed to amplify AKP's perceived failings and make government policy appear desperate and hurriedly constructed. If, as Erdogan insists, elections are more than a year off, there is still plenty of time for public opinion and trends in national polls to move in different directions. End Summary.

Istanbul Opposition Contacts: 2010 Will be an "Election Year"  
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[1](#)2. (C) Istanbul-based opposition party representatives and political contacts in recent weeks have continued to predict the AKP will call for early elections. Respected pollster Adil Gur from A&G Research said that he was among the first to predict early elections would take place in 2010, primarily because AKP is ahead of other parties in terms of planning for the next election and organizing, and because he perceived the National Unity Project to be deadlocked, with no possibility of a solution without dramatic steps -- such as an amnesty -- that cannot be taken prior to an election. Istanbul MHP Vice Chairman Nazmi Celenk echoed the expectation that elections would be held by the end of 2010. CHP Istanbul Chairman Gursel Tekin said even if elections do not take place until April 2011, 2010 will in fact be the "election year" due to the political scrambling which will be underway.

Pundits and Partisans Foresee Coalition Government  
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[1](#)3. (C) In a December meeting, SONAR Research Director Hakan Bayrakci told Poloff that whenever the elections are held, a CHP-MHP coalition would be the result. He projected that the election results would give AKP with 28 to 33 percent of the vote, CHP 25 to 28 percent, and MHP around 18 percent, although big changes in the economy, foreign relations, or other issues could change these numbers slightly (Comment: Bayrakci delivered these projections with a strikingly high level of confidence and clearly put a great deal of time into constructing his predictions. It is less clear what his predictions are based on. End Comment.). He guessed that if Sisli Mayor Mustafa Sarioglu's Turkey Change Movement (TDH) was to pass the 10 percent threshold, it would pass with around 12 percent of the vote, and under any calculation it would be mathematically impossible for the AKP to win the necessary parliamentary seats to continue as a single party government. Even with a "miracle," Bayrakci argued, the AKP could not achieve higher than 40 percent of the vote, a percentage that still would be lower than necessary to maintain its exclusive hold on power. (Note: The formula for determining Parliamentary seats is tricky; by our estimates, AKP could maintain a single party government with a percentage of the vote in the mid-thirties provided CHP and MHP also receive a low result. End Note)

[1](#)4. (C) A&G pollster Gur also told Poloffs that there is no possibility of a single-party government and that a coalition definitely will be formed following the election; he said that a CHP-MHP government would be plausible as an anti-AKP partnership. Bayrakci's view is that Prime Minister Erdogan

will be forced to seek a coalition government following the election and will ask MHP to join forces, but MHP will not be able to accept Erdogan's offer because it would "compromise their political mission." MHP would prefer to join a different coalition that excludes AKP in order to achieve

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stronger representation within the cabinet; a coalition with CHP would result in a higher number of cabinet positions for MHP because the distribution of votes presumably would be more even. Bayrakci offered that should Sarigul's party pass the threshold, a CHP-MHP-TDH coalition would also be plausible. MHP Istanbul Vice Chairman Celenk said that it is too early to predict, but that "many" are speculating about the prospects of a CHP-MHP coalition, and that unless the AKP changed dramatically, MHP would prefer not to be in the same room as AKP, let alone consider forming an AKP-MHP coalition. Separately, CHP Istanbul Chairman Tekin said that in his view a CHP-MHP coalition is the most likely outcome of the next election. He suggested that this would be a strong partnership for addressing some of Turkey's current problems because it would be harder for the public to be suspicious of such a coalition government's motives.

Polls Suggest Economy, National Unity Project Most Prominent Issues

15. (C) Poll results from October through January show support for the AKP support, but only by small margins. SONAR Research released a poll in late December which showed support for the AKP at 30.8 percent, a slight decrease from November's estimate of 32 percent. The same poll showed CHP with slight gains at 28.6 percent, and MHP also gaining ground at 20.7 percent (Comment: If these results are taken at face value, both CHP and MHP have gained roughly five percentage points since the March 2009 election, although the polling methodology -- which distributes "undecided" responses proportionately across political parties -- leaves something to be desired. End Comment). Asked about these results, Bayrakci commented that they present opportunities for smaller parties like the Saadet Party and the Democratic Party to increase their support levels by pulling from the AKP's voter base. Metropoll Strategic and Social Research Center survey results published in January 2010 painted a somewhat different picture: 32.3 percent of those polled said they would vote for AKP in parliamentary elections (a number similar to Metropoll's November results but marking a 6 percent decrease since August 2009) while CHP support had decreased slightly to 16.2 percent and 14.4 percent supported MHP, a 2 percent increase.

16. (C) Bayrakci told Poloff support for the AKP was declining because of the economy and the perceived mismanagement of the National Unity Project (formerly known as the Democratic Opening). Istanbul-based contacts agree that the economy also will play a leading role in shaping voter preferences ahead of the election, and economic issues continue to factor prominently in national poll results. SONAR's December poll results indicate that unemployment and poverty still top the list of public grievances at 66.8 percent and 60 percent respectively. Bekir Agirdir from Konda Research argued unemployment would continue to be the main issue for Turkish voters, and said current unemployment is qualitatively different than historical unemployment because of the large number of unemployed university graduates, which contributes to a growing feeling of economic unease. Compounding such economic problems, Agirdir said, is an absolute lack of public confidence in government institutions to solve these problems.

17. (U) Over 40 percent of SONAR's December poll respondents said that the National Unity Project was among Turkey's most important problems, up from 30 percent in November and just over 25 percent in October. Metropoll respondents overall considered the Project of greater importance than economic issues in 2009. On January 11, Aksam newspaper carried an A&G Research survey showing that overall public support for the National Unity Project had dropped to 27.1 percent, with AKP voters almost equally divided on the initiative. In a similar A&G poll conducted in August 2009 and published in Aksam, 45.6 percent of all respondents supported the project. According to results published in mid January, 53.8 percent of Metropoll respondents said they did not support the National Unity Project (though over 38 percent was supportive of the project, a much higher number than in A&G's study), and almost 60 percent of those polled said the government had been unsuccessful in managing the process. Among the reasons cited by respondents for the failure to manage the initiative well were a lack of preparation on the part of the government, the AKP's failure to fully inform the public of its intentions, the perception that PKK had become an interlocutor in the process and public fears that the

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initiative would lead to societal divisions.

Comment

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18. (C) Our Istanbul contacts echo the national picture on election timing: those who expect to gain ground in coming elections insist that they are coming soon, and those expecting to do poorly expect the elections will be held at the latest possible date. The insistence by opposition parties that the elections will come soon may be an attempt to shape public dialogue and amplify AKP's perceived failings. Keeping election discussions alive could make moves by the government appear as desperate measures aimed at vote-grabbing rather than solidly crafted policy. While polls and pundits appear to agree that economics and perceived mismanagement of the National Unity Project are behind the AKP's decline, the cyclical nature of Turkish politics might also be responsible \* Gur suggested that around 65 to 70 percent of voters change parties every two to three election cycles, causing a real fluctuation in election results. Poll results show that voters' optimism has sagged over the past several months -- a trend attributable to the effects of the economic crisis -- and rosier economic numbers will take time to translate into observable changes for the public. If AKPladers can put to rest rumors of early elections, there is still time for public opinion to change again (and again) on many of these issues.  
DAYON